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## Editor's Introduction: Activism and Anagnorisis

Marc Ouellette

*Old Dominion University*, [mouellet@odu.edu](mailto:mouellet@odu.edu)

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## ***Reconstruction* Vol. 11, No. 4**

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### **Activism and Anagnorisis / Marc Ouellette**

"St. James, often referred to as the "Moor-slayer," is patron saint to veterinarians, equestrians, tanners, furriers, and pharmacists."

<1> As I mull the current issue - a wonderful collection of open submissions and a terrific supplement on "post-9/11" developments, about both of which I feel too intellectually impoverished to write adequately - I am filled with mixed feelings, thoughts and even theoretical positions. This last is kind of inescapable given my best efforts to put theory into practice whenever and wherever possible. The two cannot and should not be inseparable, at least for anyone who claims to be even the most remotely involved in Cultural Studies. And yet, I know that this is the area where Cultural Studies fails most abjectly in living up to its claims and to its promise. I know this from firsthand experience and from experience *writ large*. Too many times I have received an email on the faculty list - or worse, on one of the many Cultural Studies associations' lists - from someone exhorting others to attend an important gathering, rally, action, etc. only to find that the originator of the impassioned plea could not be bothered to slip on the Aussie boots and the black turtleneck, fill the Volvo XC90 (or Subaru Legacy Outback) with properly decorated BPA-free jugs of free trade pomegranate infused coffee with smiley faces in the foam so they complement the gluten-free vegan 100 mile cupcakes, and attend the function in the official Cultural Studies uniform and regalia for all to see. In short, they cannot be bothered to put forth anything more than the daily *spectacle* of nonconformist conformity. As much as this might seem an indictment, bitterness, biting the hand that feeds, a complete lack of sympathy for people trapped by mortgages, childcare expenses, deadlines, bureaucracy, etc., it is not. In fact, it's not anything. I cannot make sense of any of it. I've long since stopped taking

stock of it other than to note it and to not behave accordingly. I am only responsible for myself and my own actions. If anything, it's resignation.

<2> I came to Cultural Studies quite accidentally and with nothing but the best of intentions because I had none. Really, it came to me and descended upon me during the summer of 1995. I was taking three wildly disparate courses - non-Chaucerian medieval lit, modern American lit and North American popular music since 1700 - which suddenly and unexpectedly became one after the revelation that there were larger things connecting them and which made understanding them so very much easier. I gave a presentation to one of the classes - on Zora Neale Hurston and debating in folk music and balladry - only to have my professor button-hole after class. I was terrified. He exclaimed, "You're doing Cultural Studies!" to which I replied, "I didn't mean to." "No, it'll be great. Follow me. I've got something for you," he said. I was drawn to the combination of theory and of practice, especially in terms of social justice. This had drawn me to engineering but the corporatization of the discipline was among the biggest reasons I left that for the humanities. Of course, now they have "Engineers without borders," but I was finished with grad school by the time that happened. Maybe I should have toughed it out and started something like that rather than becoming a devoté of CS, though I still think it was the right choice.



St. James Park, Toronto, Canada

<3> The sentiments expressed here really has been brewing for a while, but the need came to a head two weeks ago. I read in the Toronto dailies that one of my former students is one of the six of the hundreds detained, charged, pepper sprayed, rendered hypothermic, etc. who will actually be charged for allegedly conspiring (with considerable help from the RCMP infiltrators, of whom it seems there is one for every third "conspirator") to disrupt the G8/G20 gatherings in Toronto. The number is roughly the equal to the number of charges that will likely not hold against those policing the event who (allegedly) misled the Canadian public and the courts regarding the application of an obscure law that (allegedly) was not in force but was touted as giving police extraordinary powers. This includes the charges that likely will not hold against the ringleader of several beatings captured on video and on film because no other officers, including the suspect officer's own roommate and squad mates have memories

sufficient to allow them to identify the suspect officer. Somehow, though, they were all very clear on remembering that anyone attending a peaceful gathering in a public place must be a conspirator, after all, these are roughly the words - "some people think they have the right to gather in a public place" - of former Toronto Police Chief turned Ontario Provincial Police Commissioner turned current member of the ruling "Harper Government" in Ottawa.[1] Yet, the student who is charged never seemed the sort to actually do anything. I do remember him because he found my teaching and my version of activism to be completely unsatisfying. It was not because I was doing anything wrong. Rather, the reality of the political situation coupled with the knowledge of the theory meant that doing nothing while criticizing everything was the preferable course of (non)action. This would be the best choice for anyone, especially given the reality which made him, and so many others, question "What could one person do?"



St. James Park, Toronto, Canada

<4> He was a strong student and one of many who exemplified, for me, the angst of that/this generation. Clearly, action is needed, but that's something really left best to someone else, somewhere else, because we just don't do those kinds of things. Protesting and marching are really not needed in North America, or the western democracies. It's rather foolish, old-fashioned and, I've even heard some say, "immature." These were the same students who loved culture jamming and Naomi Klein and yet found Heath and Potter's evisceration of the latter inspiring and enjoyable. I hate teaching any of it. Culture jamming is a self-indulgent ego boost based on the gratification needs of the sender and really ignores two-thirds of the old-fashioned but still relevant rhetorical triangle. The CS celebs - er, my "colleagues" - seem like nothing more than effete elites sparring about lofts on King St. West and other consumer choices *qua* political action, up to and including suggesting that government action can be trusted to effect important change, like new bike lanes to accommodate the growing number of eight-foot-long skateboards and titanium scooters purchased by fauxhemian lumberjacks. In a way, I was surprised and a little proud of my former student. I have to admit having a few moments' anxiety about whether or not I'd be held somehow accountable for inspiring any of his actions. I have been teaching a course on Countercultures for years, have been including social justice on courses since the beginning and I've never been afraid of getting my hard-



toe boots out and finding a picket line or a chow line that needed a body even if that meant calmly calling the bluff of "trojan donuts" who were trying to intimidate high school students sharing food with the homeless or staring down drug dealers who want to scare off food resellers for fear people become more addicted to eating than to crack.

<5> I won't claim to be better than my colleagues, celebrity or otherwise. Quite frankly, I'm clearly worse. I've run afoul of my faculty. At least three times I've been accused of being a Rev. Moon-like Rasputin orchestrating students to give voice to their grievances regarding silly little things like the corporate takeover of their school, the obfuscation of the closure of certain programs with political "agendas" and the fostering of a xenophobic, homophobic and misogynist culture that tolerated and fostered the rape and ongoing harassment of the victim. I've also heard faculty members who had affairs with students opine that having anything to do with such protests would be taking a risk. Quite right. These people have been promoted and I remain ineligible for the all-important grants that - like a ballplayer's salary - measure success in our field. Of course, in the irony of it all, my research and publications have put me on the list of those who review the grant applications. I mention it only because the irony is rich. Indeed, now I can confirm that the criteria for getting one of those grants is having one of those grants and rather than inspiring innovative research and activism the inclusion of Cultural Studies types in the process leads to rank opportunism and, quite simply, greed. I keep my own equilibrium by remembering David Lodge's characters, especially Fulvia Morgana and her partner, in *Small World*. The pair live in opulence despite being radical Italian Marxist academics. This is not at all hypocritical because they know someone must be on top and someone must be on the bottom, so it is better that they are on top given their intimate knowledge of the theory and best practices. I have sat on a committee with Fulvia Morgana, as have we all. They made their choices; I've made mine.



St. James Park, Toronto, Canada

<6> I mention all of these choices because the timing of the indictment of my former student and my own lament of the loss of Cultural Studies occurs roughly contemporaneously with the end of the year, the end of another volume of *Reconstruction*, the end of the "Occupy" movement, the second

"end" of the second war in Iraq and the end of the western democracies. In about two weeks' time, I will ask my Counterculture students a series of survey questions. One of these is whether or not democracy and capitalism are the same thing. Invariably, over three-quarters will answer "yes," as they have since I started asking this question in 2005. Nothing that has happened since the economic crisis of 2008 will have convinced them of anything else. Headlines everywhere abound in evidence to the contrary. Charges of fraud against Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac executives only mean that individuals made bad choices and indicate no flaw in the system. The same can be said for Nortel executives and the "rogue" traders at UBS and elsewhere. Lehman Brothers failure was the result of the greed of a few. The rampant writing down of corporate taxes, including the billions that Goldman Sachs has evaded, come down to one person's errors. Canada's budget watchdog calls the nation "unsustainable." The announcement by UBS' Andy Lees that the US economy is doomed somehow results in a call for less rather than more banking regulation. Not even statements by officials from the IMF regarding the need for nations to cede sovereignty to banks really seem to have registered. The recession comes down to individuals' insatiable need for gratification through spending and the resultant increase in consumer debt. One person at a time, we made the next depression through voracious over-consumption. Institutional *apparati* play no part in individual consumer decisions.

<7> If anything, my former student's original position was probably the best one. The "Occupy" movement was met with tremendous brutality from police and from commentators. Ann Coulter called them "flea baggers" in reference to the "tea bagger" sobriquet with which the extreme American right - er, mainstream, as her employers call them - are met. The *Windsor Star's* Chris Van der doelen like many right-wing extremists in this nation encouraged Canadians to do the same. Apparently, there is nothing to protest in North America. The demands of the Occupiers have been characterized as diffuse, disparate, irrational, ridiculous and laughable. While there has been almost unanimous support for the protesters of "The Arab Spring" - well, except for those in Yemen and in Syria which begs still another question - the reality of those nations has made the Occupiers' point seem a little underwhelming. Compared to Libyans, Tunisians and Egyptians what could North Americans really have to protest about? However, they must be onto something because they were met with violence - vicious pepper spray attacks on students at UC Davis and an equally vicious assault on a group of young women by New York's "heroes" in blue, for example, targeted peaceful protesters and received barely a slap on the wrist or a whimper from the press. Questioning the divinity of the current version of free market capitalism, apparently, is a treasonous act. In contrast, I have yet to see "tea baggers" attacked in the same way, though if they are to be believed the world has not seen freedom-fighting martyrs of their like since Jeanne d'Arc. Then again, tea baggers carry guns to their meetings - they're never protests or rallies - in order to defend against the dangerous erosion of personal rights that developments like universal access to quality health care might entail. Sometimes, what's good for everyone is also what's good for me. However, the contingency of that very point, if anything, stands as the very reason the Occupy movement, like CS invariably has to fail.

<8> So, it was with little surprise that I found St. James Park, the cite of Toronto's occupation, to be in even more pristine condition after the action ended. On the busiest shopping Saturday of the year, in an area that attracts scores of the homeless and borders the largest market in the city, an entertainment district, a college, a university, several hospitals and cathedrals, Torontonians respectfully stayed off the freshly laid sod. Members of the community have vowed to remain vigilant in protecting the sod and the other minor repairs that were effected. In fact, the Occupy people had about \$10,000 to help offset the cost of repairs. It seems throwing a little money at the situation can fix anything. The free market would even decided how left-wing protest would end. If the barricades and signs ever come down, there were be no trace, no reminder that the occupation ever happened. Then again, another question I have asked my classes since 2005 is to name the biggest news story of the preceding four months. Then I ask them to repeat their answer on the last day of class. Without fail, they have forgotten. Two tsunamis, several earthquakes, Michael Jackson's death and a host of other items quickly were kicked to the curb, if not under the proverbial bus. However, if we don't go back to business as usual the terrorists might win. It's just that nobody other than a few editorialists and *The Guardian* will admit that the current and the next terrorists might have more in common with a crazed Norwegian or the Michigan militia than with an observant Muslim or a left-wing academic.



St. James Park, Toronto, Canada

<9> Ultimately, the more things stay the same, the more they change. Of course, this is completely backwards. So is thinking that ceding sovereignty to banks will protect anyone's rights or future prosperity. So is thinking that CS would be any different than A-AS, WS, QS, IS or any other subject area that could be turned into an acronym and a revenue stream worth exploiting. All the while, the theorist in me remembers that individualizing and pathologizing is precisely the means by which any institutional structure can obfuscate its complicity in furthering and in orchestrating otherwise unacceptable actions. Sports leagues do this all the time. The NFL and the NHL suspend players for illegal hits while encouraging the violence in their advertising campaigns. Suspensions, though, allow them to blame individual players for offenses and to deny that the very foundations of the sport are dependent on and demanding of

the unnecessary violence. It comes down to one player's choice to break the rules.

<10> To be honest, I have used this logic in my classes. Usually, someone in my countercultures class, which emphasizes non-violence and using the tendencies of the system to subvert the system, will accuse me of running the class so that it becomes what *The Turner Diaries* have become for the Tea Party. I respond with the pat refrain borrowed liberally from Malcolm X: "I don't have to convince anyone to do what they already intended to do." Clearly, anything that becomes a group movement is problematic. However, when a collection of like-minded individuals choose to act, it's a different story. I've been as radical as to ask my students to dip their toes into activism. This has produced a zine and later a radio show which combined with a concerted effort to increase alternatives to the automobile on campus, including a transit hub and more bike lanes. It led to a free-cycle program and a bike recycling shop. It led to two student referenda on monopolistic contracts. It led to helping to rid the campus of an inexorably hateful rag that had gone beyond the state of offensive or obscene and into the realm of illegal. It led me to become the first and only faculty to go on a service learning placement. In other words, the class has been an abysmal failure. It does, however, give me an answer every time someone asks, "What can one person do?" It also gives me an answer every time I am challenged, "Well, what are you doing?" Rather than tell them anything that I am doing or have done, I simply respond: "I teach." My position is simple. If I reach only one student per semester, with everything else that competes for their time, then I've accomplished something. Maybe Cultural Studies has died. Maybe left-wing activism in North America has died. Maybe there isn't anything to mourn at all. Maybe I should just be thankful I haven't been sodded over and made to disappear. If anything, the problem is one of knowing how to handle success. Anyone can rail against something all day long. That's easy. Being good to people and never letting anyone think for you become incredibly difficult. What do you do when you're in charge? Are there really tenured radicals or does the devil really wear Blundstones? They sure don't wear them to march, unless it's to defend grant funding.[2]



St. James Park, Toronto, Canada



<11> The last time Phil Ochs sang "I ain't marching any more," it was not just war to which he was referring. He had resigned himself to stop marching for the peace movement, too. He died tormented and disillusioned, as we all know. My colleague Alan Clinton reminds me, "Political mood, in the Heideggerian sense, is a completely legitimate thing to investigate. It is related to the 'political reality' in an uncertain way, but oftentimes (as Heidegger and others noted) our neglect of mood (that we are in, not that is in us) comes at the expense of that very reality we think we can arrive at through more traditional (instrumental) means of logic" (email to author 13 Dec. 2011). In thinking about this, I am also reminded of another thing a professor told me in the summer of 1995: "You can't sell out if you don't buy in." Of course, this works both ways. Those driving luxury SUVs so they can "appropriate the symbols," as one colleague claims, never bought into Cultural Studies or into activism, so it wouldn't be fair to say they have sold out, either. It was just a means to an end. Simultaneously, buying in sets one up for the despair and the disillusionment Ochs experienced. In fact, at some point the despair and the disillusionment become self-inflicted.

<12> Long ago it was instilled in me that despair is the greatest sin of all, far outweighing any question of faith. It comes down to one's own personal involvement, one's own personal commitment, one's own personal choices. Of these and in these I can be sure. The park does look lovely. The coming snow and the festive lights will only make it more so. How can that be a bad thing? Maybe the occupation was a chance for others to dip their toes (and more) in the waters of activism and to see that it's not just a set of consumer choices. How can that be a bad thing? If it was just another exercise in the cleverness for the sake of cleverness that defines hipsterism, then I'll have another lecture's worth of material and a couple of good one-liners-at least-because I will teach. Every way I know how, I will teach.

## Endnotes

[1] Indeed, Julian Fantino's misunderstanding of things like the constitution and the Charter of Rights would seem to make him ideally suited to be a leading member of the current regime, which went to great lengths to rebrand the Government of Canada into the "Harper Government," especially in the period prior to and during the election of 2011.

[2] See Ouellette on Sterba vs. Farrell in [Reconstruction 8.1](#) for several examples.

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